Animal Attraction

Martine Colette runs a shelter of last resort for creatures great, small and grizzly

"I can make a difference," says Colette (taking a licking from a timber wolf at her Waystation). "Without the effort, they wouldn't be alive."

Martine Colette is petting her kitten Drifter and stroking his furry cheeks. "Good boy," she says as he rolls on his back in search of some extra caresses. Never mind that Drifter is a 550-lb. tiger cub who devours 10 pounds of raw meat a day—he still needs a tickle now and then. "A cat," says Colette, "is a cat is a cat."

She should know. Colette, 57, keeps dozens of tigers—not to mention assorted lions, lizards, wolves, alligators, llamas, macaws and the occasional emu—on her rolling 160-acre ranch in Little Tujunga Canyon outside Los Angeles. It's all part of the Wildlife Waystation, a sanctuary for injured and neglected wild animals that she founded in 1976. Home to some 1,100 exotic creatures, including no-longer-trendy potbellied pigs, medical-lab castoffs, animals abandoned by circuses and an orangutan named Lowell who is retired from making movies, the Waystation is unique in that,

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICIA LANZA

COURTESY MARTINE COLETTE

Actresses Dyan Cannon (left) and Drew Barrymore help Colette (in '97) raise funds. Says Barrymore: "She has inspired me for years."

unlike most shelters, which take in only certain species, Colette's accepts just about any animal that needs her help. "Martine is the world's most giving individual to animals," says actress Drew Barrymore, a friend and frequent volunteer at the not-for-profit Waystation. "She is truly the last hope for many of them."

One big reason the Waystation has been successful is Colette's uncanny, Dr. Doolittle-like rapport with the animals. "Somehow she communicates with them," marvels Madeline Bernstein, president of the SPCA in Los Angeles. "There can be 10 people trying to move an animal, and she'll go in and say, 'Let me talk to him,' and the animal will respond." Together with a paid staff of 22, plus 35 full-time volunteers, Colette spends her days nurturing the animals and rounding up new ones in need of assistance. Her most recent acquisition: Kelty, a yearling grizzly who was attacking tents (though not campers) in Yellowstone National Park. Colette made arrangements to take the bear before park officials could put him to sleep, then hauled him away in her specially equipped van. "He's settling in nicely," she says of Kelty, who is in a facility in Arizona until his spacious cage at the Waystation is ready. "The reward is seeing the animals well and healthy."

French-born Colette, the only child of a Belgian businessman and his wife, a homemaker, became fascinated with wildlife while on nonhunting safaris in Africa as a child. After marrying a screenwriter and moving to Hollywood in 1966, she began collecting exotic birds, reptiles and other pets abandoned by their owners. Divorced two years later, she became a costume designer and eventually worked for the band Earth, Wind and Fire, earning enough to pay $250,000 for her ranch in the foothills of the Angeles National Forest. "I'd take the red-eye to Chicago and spend the day doing fittings," she recalls, "then be back here by 9 p.m. to start working with the animals."

Soon, though, the task of fixing up her rugged property, building chain-link cages and caring for the animals forced her to give up designing. Then, after financing the Waystation on her own for years, Colette began offering tours of the ranch and throwing fund-raising galas. Today most of the refuge's $2 million annual budget comes from private donations. "I'm not comfortable fund-raising," she admits, "but you're not asking for you, you're asking for the animals."

"This place is like her field of dreams," a friend says of Colette (in her cabin at the refuge).

Divorced from a second husband in 1991 (she has no children), the feisty, petite Colette recently began dating a veterinarian but knows some men can't deal with her affection for lions and the like. "I think they prefer women who are more traditional," she says. "Though I do cook very well." For now, she is content to be surrounded by her animals, some of whom are released into the wild or adopted after healing while others live out their lives in her care.

Although she has little free time, she likes wandering in the canyons near the refuge with a lion or tiger on a leash—a practice that scares the daylights out of hikers. "They are wonderfully easy to deal with," Colette says of the big cats. "Give me 25 lions over one temperamental human. Dealing with people is the single most stressful thing I do."

- Alex Tresniowski
- Leslie Berestein in Los Angeles